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Lysine and arginine side-chains in glycosaminoglycan-protein complexes investigated by NMR, cross-linking and mass spectrometry. A case study of the Factor H: heparin interaction**

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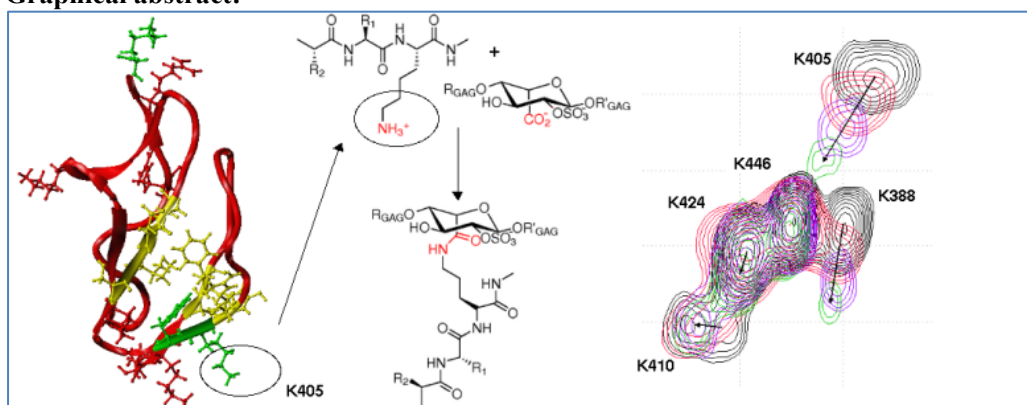
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Supporting information:

Details concerning the assignment of the resonances of lysine side-chains, 1H-15N HSQC spectrum of the cross-linked CFH~7 and the MALDI-TOF spectra of peptides generated by trypsin digestion and microwave-assisted TFA-cleavage of the cross-linked complex. This information is available free of charge via the Internet at <http://pubs.acs.org/>

Graphical abstract:



Abstract

We have used the interaction between module 7 of complement factor H (CFH~7) and a fully sulfated heparin tetrasaccharide to exemplify a new approach for studying contributions of basic side-chains to the formation of glycosaminoglycan (GAG) : protein complexes. We first employed H¹⁵QC and H²CN NMR experiments to monitor the side-chain resonances of lysines and arginines in ¹⁵N, ¹³C-labelled protein during titrations with a fully sulfated heparin tetrasaccharide under physiological conditions. Under identical conditions, and using ¹⁵N-labelled protein, we then cross-linked tetrasaccharide to CFH~7 and confirmed a 1:1 stoichiometry by FT-ICR-MS. We subsequently characterized this covalent protein-GAG conjugate by NMR and further MS techniques. MALDI-TOF MS identified protein fragments obtained via trypsin digestion or chemical fragmentation, yielding information concerning the site of GAG attachment. Combining MS and NMR data allowed us to identify the side-chain of K405 as the point of attachment of the cross-linked heparin oligosaccharide to CFH~7. Based on the analysis of NMR and MS data of the non-covalent and cross-linked CFH~7 : tetrasaccharide complexes we conclude that the K446 side-chain is not essential for binding of the tetrasaccharide, despite the large chemical shift perturbations of its backbone amide ¹⁵N and ¹H resonances during titrations. We show that R444 provides the most important charge-charge interaction within a C-terminal heparin-binding sub-site of CFH~7, while side-chains of R404, K405 and K388 are the predominant contributors to an N-terminal binding sub-site located in the immediate vicinity of residue 402, which is implicated in age-related macular degeneration (AMD).

Introduction

Glycosaminoglycans (GAGs) are linear polysaccharides found ubiquitously on animal cell surfaces and in the extracellular matrix. GAGs usually occur linked to protein cores as proteoglycans, and in most cases accomplish their biological functions through interactions with ligand proteins¹⁻⁴. Such interactions have a strong electrostatic component mediated by the negatively charged functional groups of GAGs (sulfates, sulfonamides, and carboxyl groups) and positively charged amino-acid side-chains of proteins (lysines, arginines and occasionally histidines). In enzymes which are involved in GAG biosynthesis and degradation, GAGs bind in deep canyons and clefts⁵. In complexes with growth factors, however, GAGs often sit in shallow grooves on protein surfaces⁶⁻⁸, making these interactions less specific than protein-protein interactions. Charge density, rather than a requirement for a specific structural motif, is often sufficient for complex formation⁹⁻¹¹. A well documented exception is the interaction of a heparin pentasaccharide with antithrombin III which requires a very specific GAG motif^{12,13}.

Nonetheless, GAG composition varies depending on the type and developmental stage of the tissue in which they are expressed¹⁴⁻¹⁶, hinting at the functional relevance of subtle structural variations. Indeed, changes in GAG structure and composition have been identified as possible biomarkers for cancer^{17,18}. Developing new methods for the characterization of protein-GAG complexes¹⁹ is therefore important for our understanding of the biological roles of GAGs and essential for realizing their therapeutic potential¹⁰.

The growing awareness of the role played by heparan sulfate (HS) in cell-cell communication and the potential applications of cross-linked heparin-protein conjugates for medical purposes underline the importance of structural elucidation of such constructs. HS/heparin chains cross-linked to protein are likely to be more stable to enzymatic degradation than the free GAGs. Covalent protein-GAG conjugates may also be more potent in the formation of ternary complexes, such as with signaling receptors, than transient, non-covalent protein-GAG complexes²⁰. Recently, a synthetic CD4-HS glycoconjugate was shown to inhibit CCR5- and CXCR4-mediated HIV-1 attachment and viral entry²¹.

In this study we present novel approaches for the characterization of non-covalent protein-GAG complexes and covalently cross-linked protein-GAG conjugates, in solution, by a combination of NMR spectroscopy and mass spectrometry. Our methodology is illustrated using the interaction between HS and module 7 of human complement factor H (CFH~7). Mature HS contains variably sulfated domains interrupted by domains essentially lacking sulfation²² and, typically, proteins bind to the highly sulfated domains²³. Consequently, heparin, which shares an identical carbohydrate skeleton with HS but displays a higher and more evenly distributed level of sulfation, is often used in structural studies as a HS mimetic, as is the case in the present study.

CFH, the main fluid-phase regulator of the alternative pathway of complement²⁴, is a 155-kDa heparin-binding protein consisting of twenty ~7-kDa complement control protein modules (CCPs). CCPs have a prolate ellipsoid shape, high β -sheet content and two conserved disulfide bonds per module. They are connected by linkers of 3-8 residues, giving CFH the appearance of 20 beads on a string. By binding to HS or other cell surface polyanions²⁵, CFH protects host cells from complement attack^{26,27}. This interaction is thought to lie at the centre of host-cell protection from the innate immune system, and is particularly important for cells lacking alternative membrane-bound regulators.

The Y402H single nucleotide polymorphism in CFH~7, present in about 30% of the population, is associated (in homozygous individuals) with a 7-fold increase in the occurrence of age-related macular degeneration (AMD)²⁸⁻³¹. As CFH~7 contributes directly to one of the two principal heparin-binding sites in CFH, it was proposed that a change in polyanion-binding properties of the histidine allotype compromises the ability of CFH to protect the Bruch's membrane from complement-

mediated damage. This membrane underlies the retinal pigment epithelium, and its damage triggers inflammatory processes eventually leading to AMD onset³². In this study we have used the Y402 variant, which is referred to from now on as CFH~7. Solution structures of both variants of CFH~7 have been previously solved by NMR³³. The crystal structure of the disease-linked variant H402, in the context of the triple module CFH~6-8 complexed with sucrose octasulfate (SOS), has also been determined previously³⁴.

Protein-GAG interactions are typically weak and fall into the fast-exchange regime on the NMR timescale. This facilitates tracking of ligand-induced chemical shift perturbations in ¹H, ¹⁵N-HSQC spectra of ¹⁵N-labelled proteins through chemical-shift averaging of free and bound protein. However, such analysis is generally limited to backbone NH resonances. A lack of chemical shift perturbations of the backbone NH atoms belonging to basic residues is a poor indicator of non-involvement of their side-chains in GAG binding while, *vice versa*, changes in backbone NH chemical shifts do not necessarily imply the involvement of the corresponding arginine and lysine side-chains. In order to complement backbone NH chemical shift perturbation data, we monitored lysine N^εH₃⁺ and arginine N^εH^ε resonances during GAG titrations. In addition, we used chemical cross-linking as a means to probe the roles of individual lysine side-chains in the formation of protein-GAG complexes. We employed a zero-length cross-linking technique, originally designed to cross-link proteins through contacts between primary amino and carboxylate groups³⁵. This methodology couples the amino group of a lysine side-chain to the activated carboxylate of a GAG oligosaccharide³⁶⁻³⁹. Assuming that the binding mode of the activated carbohydrate is similar to that of the unmodified oligosaccharide, formation of an amide bond provides evidence for spatial proximity between a specific lysine side-chain and a carboxyl group of the oligosaccharide.

Experimental Section

Preparation of fully sulfated heparin tetrasaccharide

Fully sulfated tetrasaccharide, ΔUA(2S)-GlcNS(6S)-IdoA(2S)-GlcNS(6S), was produced by controlled, partial, heparinase I digestion of low-molecular weight heparin, and subsequent purification by gel-filtration and ion-exchange chromatography as described previously³³. The purity was checked by ¹H-NMR and concentrations were determined using absorbance at 232 nm with a molar absorption coefficient of 5200 M⁻¹ cm⁻¹⁴⁰.

Preparation of CFH~7

A protein construct containing CFH residues 386 to 446 (Y402) was cloned into the *Pichia pastoris* expression vector pPICZαB (Invitrogen) and transformed into the *P. pastoris* strain KM71H

(Invitrogen). ^{15}N -labelled protein was expressed in baffled shaker flasks, or a Bioflow 3000 fermenter, using $^{15}\text{NH}_4$ as the sole nitrogen source. CFH~7 was purified from the supernatant using cation-exchange chromatography at pH 6.0³³. Purity was checked by SDS-PAGE and MALDI-TOF MS. The protein consisted of a major fraction with the N-terminal truncated artifact EAAG and a minor fraction with the full artifact EAEAAG. The former component could readily be purified on a Mono-S cation-exchange column (GE Healthcare) using 20 mM potassium phosphate, pH 6.0, and a linear gradient to 1 M NaCl. ^{13}C , ^{15}N -labelled CFH~7, as prepared previously³³, was also used in this study. Protein concentrations were determined using absorbance at 280 nm (calculated extinction coefficient = $13200 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-1}$).

Zero-length cross-linking of a protein-GAG complex³⁵

Desalted fully sulfated heparin tetrasaccharide (0.2 mg), 22 mM 1-ethyl-3-[3-dimethylaminopropyl]-carbodiimide hydrochloride (EDC) and 30 mM sulfo-N-hydroxysuccinimide (sulfo-NHS) in a total volume of 1 mL of 50 mM 2-(N-morpholino)ethanesulfonic acid (MES), pH 6.0 were incubated at 25 °C for 15 min. The activated tetrasaccharide was recovered from the cross-linking reagents by quick passage over a PD-10 desalting column (GE Healthcare) and immediately mixed with 2.3 mg of CFH~7 in 1 ml of 50 mM Tris-HCl, pH 6.0. The cross-linking reaction mixture was incubated at 25 °C for 3 hrs before purification by cation-exchange chromatography on a Mono-S column (GE Healthcare) with 20 mM potassium phosphate, pH 6.0 as the running buffer. The free protein bound to the column, while the anionic, cross-linked protein-GAG was collected in the flow-through. Mono-cross-linking was confirmed by MS after buffer exchange into 50 mM ammonium acetate pH 4.5 using TubeODialyzers (G Biosciences) with M_r cut-off = 1 kDa.

NMR experiments

All NMR experiments, with the exception of ^{15}N -relaxation measurements, were conducted on a 600 MHz Bruker AVANCE spectrometer equipped with a 5-mm cryogenic probe. Heteronuclear in-phase single quantum coherence (HISQC)⁴¹ spectra of free and cross-linked protein were collected in 20 mM potassium phosphate, pH 3.0) at 283 K on a uniformly ^{15}N -labelled sample of 50 μM CFH~7. HISQC spectra were acquired using a coaxial NMR tube with the capillary (Norell) filled with D_2O to avoid proton-deuterium exchange. The ^{15}N offset was set to 33 ppm and a spectral width of 5 ppm was used in the indirectly detected dimension. A $900 \mu\text{s}$ 180° ^{15}N rSNOB pulse⁴² was applied during the final refocusing period. Typically, 64 increments were acquired in the ^{15}N dimension resulting in the acquisition time of 106 ms in t_1 . Spectra were typically acquired in < 1 h. Assignment of the lysine $\text{N}^\zeta\text{H}_3^+$ cross peaks was accomplished by collecting a (H)CCENH₃⁴¹ spectrum on a 0.5 mM sample of free, uniformly ^{13}C - and ^{15}N -labelled CFH~7 in 20 mM potassium phosphate, pH 3.0 at 283 K, and

comparison of the C^α - C^β chemical shifts with a previously assigned (H)C(CO)NH-TOCSY spectrum^{33,43} collected at pH 5.2 (20 mM sodium acetate) and 298 K (Fig. 1S). A titration of 0.1 mM ^{13}C , ^{15}N -CFH~7 with the heparin tetrasaccharide was conducted in 20 mM potassium phosphate, pH 7.4 at 298 K using protein:GAG molar ratios of 1:0, 1:0.5, 1:1 and 1:2 and monitored by the 2D H_2CN experiments⁴⁴. ^{15}N and ^{13}C offsets of 33 and 42 ppm were used. All ^{15}N pulses were nonselective. A $1500\ \mu\text{s}\ 180^\circ\ ^{13}\text{N}$ reBURP pulse⁴⁵ was applied during the final refocusing period. Typically, 64 or 32 increments were acquired in the ^{15}N or ^{13}C dimensions resulting in the acquisition times of 106 and 21 ms. 2D ^{15}N and ^{13}C planes were acquired in 2.5 and 1 h, respectively. Lysine cross peaks were assigned using the N^ϵ -chemical shifts, as obtained for the HISC spectra, and transferred with the help of further 2D H_2CN spectra collected at intermediate temperatures and pH values. ^1H - ^{15}N HSQC spectra were acquired using standard parameters and ^{15}N offset of 120 ppm. Evaluation and assignment of protein NMR spectra were done using CcpNmr Analysis⁴⁶. ^{15}N -relaxation data were acquired on an 800-MHz NMR instrument equipped with a 5-mm cryogenic probe using 25 μM CFH~7 and 40 μM tetrasaccharide in 20 mM sodium acetate, pH 5.0 at 298 K. The intensities of individual cross peaks, obtained by deconvolution of NH signals in the Bruker TOPSPIN program, were fitted to an exponential decay in Gnuplot.

Trypsin digestion

Samples of 65 μg CFH~7, either free or as cross-linked conjugate, were treated with 0.25 mM dithiothreitol (DTT) and 8 M urea in a total volume of 400 μL and incubated at 75 $^\circ\text{C}$ for 1 hr. The unfolded and reduced samples were alkylated by incubation with 125 mM iodoacetamide at room temperature (total volume 500 μL). Dialysis into 50 mM ammonium acetate, pH 7.4, was conducted overnight before 2.5 μg trypsin (sequencing grade, Promega) was added in a volume of 500 μL . Digestion proceeded at 37 $^\circ\text{C}$ for 1.5 hrs and trypsin was then reversibly deactivated by reducing the pH to 4.0 with 1 M acetic acid and cooling the samples to 4 $^\circ\text{C}$. MALDI-TOF MS was used to assess the degree of digestion. For complete digestion, trypsin was re-activated by raising the sample pH to 8.2 and incubating overnight at 37 $^\circ\text{C}$.

Microwave-assisted acid hydrolysis

Cross-linked conjugate (30 μL of 80 μM) was mixed with 0.1 mM DTT and 20% trifluoroacetic acid (TFA) in a total volume of 50 μL in a 1.5-mL Eppendorf microcentrifuge tube⁴⁷. The sample was placed within a glass beaker in a domestic microwave oven, along with a second glass beaker containing roughly 100 mL water for absorption of excess radiation, and heated with 950 Watts for 6 mins in two-minute steps. After each step, the sample was opened to release the pressure. The sample

was then subjected to MALDI-TOF MS. The web server ProSight PTM (<https://prosightptm.scs.uiuc.edu/>) was used to assist in peptide identification.

Mass spectrometry

MALDI-TOF spectra were acquired on a Voyager-DE STR MALDI-TOF instrument (Applied Biosystems) with a nitrogen laser in positive mode. Matrices used were sinapinic acid for protein samples and alpha-cyano-4-hydroxy-cinnamic acid (CHCA) for peptides. Matrices were prepared by mixing 15 mg sinapinic acid or 10 mg CHCA with 400 μ L double-distilled water, 100 μ L 3% TFA and 500 μ L acetonitrile, followed by sonication for 3 mins. Generally, 0.5 μ L of protein or peptide samples were mixed with 0.5 μ L of the appropriate matrix directly on the MALDI-TOF plate. The laser intensity was adjusted manually for each sample. Accurate mass spectra were recorded using a 12 T Apex-Qe FT-ICR mass spectrometer (Bruker Daltonics, Billerica, MA). Sample infusion was performed in positive-ion mode, using a TriVersa NanoMate (Advion Biosciences, Ithica, NY) chip-based nanoelectrospray ionisation (nanoESI) robot. The broadband spectrum was acquired from 100 accumulations using a time domain data size of 512k word, prior to Fourier transformation. The mass error between the most abundant isotope peak measured at 1693.09 m/z and the peak in the simulated pattern was 8 ppm. The mass of the cross-linked CFH~7 : tetrasaccharide conjugate was calculated as the individual masses of the free protein plus tetrasaccharide minus the one water molecule eliminated during cross-linking; all sulfates and the remaining carboxyl group in the GAG moiety were considered to be protonated.

Results

Titration of CFH~7 with fully sulfated heparin tetrasaccharide monitored by ^1H , ^{15}N -HSQC

Combined chemical shift changes of backbone NH resonances at the end point of the CFH~7 titration with tetrasaccharide are illustrated in Fig. 1a. Residues with resonances most affected by binding are highlighted on the lowest energy solution structure³³ of CFH~7 in Fig. 1b. Several of these are in close proximity to Y402, the residue whose variation is linked to AMD. CFH~7 contains five lysines and four arginines which are also highlighted. Five of these basic residues are located towards the N-terminus, two occur within the middle of the module, while the two remaining ones are located close to the C-terminus. Only three (R404, K405 and K446) out of these nine residues had backbone NH ^{15}N and ^1H resonances significantly affected by binding of the tetrasaccharide (Fig 1).

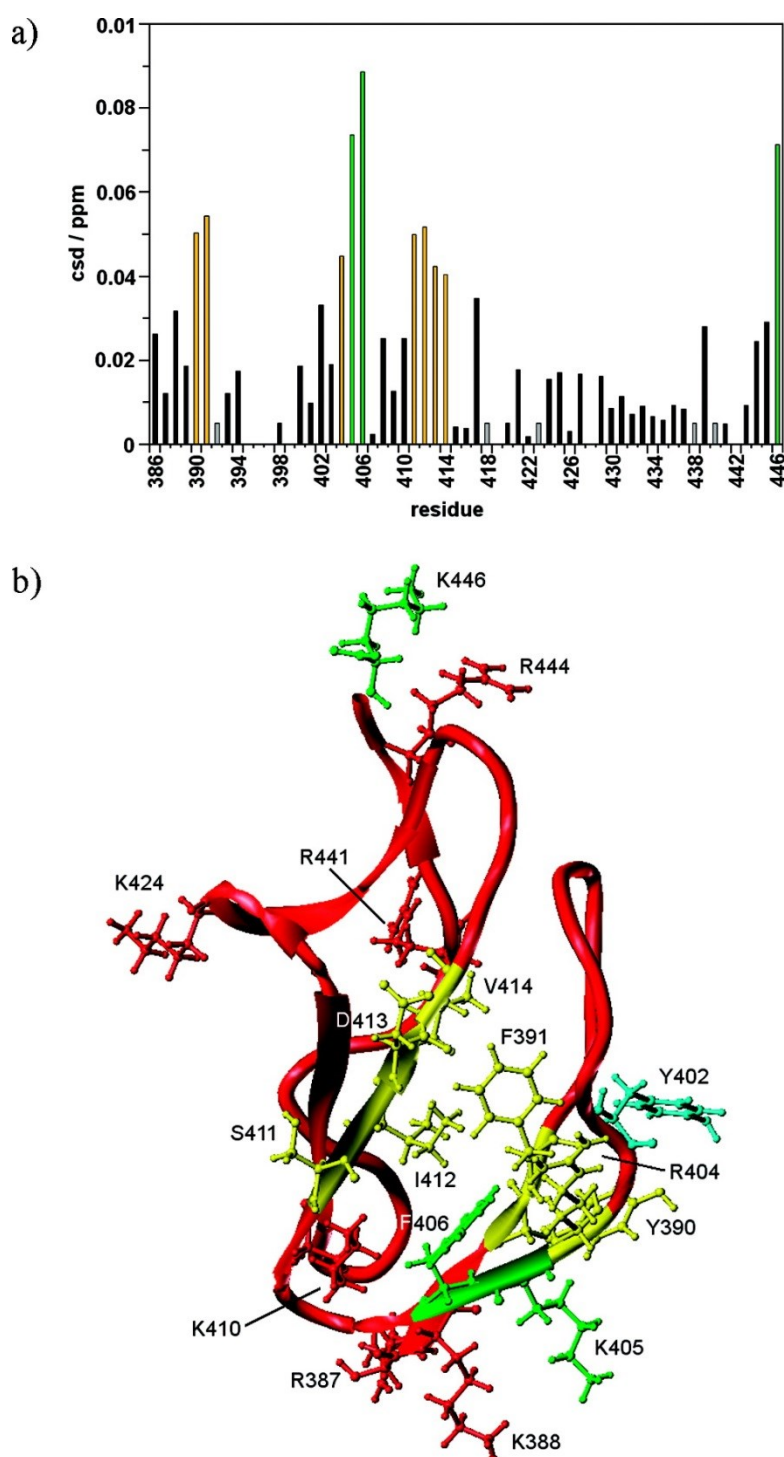


Figure 1. (a) Combined ^1H and ^{15}N chemical shift changes of CFH~7 during ^1H , ^{15}N -HSQC titrations (molar ratio of protein : carbohydrate = 1 : 8) with fully sulfated heparin tetrasaccharide. Residues with chemical shift differences of 0.4-0.6 ppm or > 0.6 ppm are highlighted in yellow or green, respectively. Not observable proline residues are shown in gray and given the arbitrary combined chemical shift difference of 0.005 ppm. (b) NMR structure of CFH~7 (pdb entry 2JGX) displaying in yellow or green residues highlighted in (a). The AMD-associated residue 402 is shown in cyan. Side-chains of the remaining basic residues are shown in red. Figure rendered using Sybyl (Tripos).

Dimerisation of CFH~7 caused by heparin tetrasaccharide

As a consequence of the helical nature of heparin⁴⁸⁻⁵⁰, its negative charges are distributed on both faces of the helix and can be presented to proteins on either side. Indeed a 1:2 GAG:protein complex has been observed for GAG fragments as short as tetrasaccharides, *e.g.* in the crystal structure of acidic fibroblast growth factor in complex with a fully sulfated heparin tetrasaccharide⁶. In solution, dimerisation would be expected to slow down molecular tumbling and affect ¹⁵N NMR relaxation times. In the very fast monomer-dimer exchange approximation, no additional broadening of signals results from chemical exchange, thus the measured relaxation times should reflect the weighted average of the relaxation times of monomeric and dimeric species⁵¹. The majority of backbone NH signals of CFH~7 exhibited marginal chemical shift changes upon addition of tetrasaccharide, validating this approximation. The ¹⁵N T₁ and T₂ relaxation times were measured⁵² in a series of 1D experiments acquired at 800 MHz, and the rotational correlation time, τ_c , of CFH~7 was determined using the R2R1 program (A. G. Palmer III, Columbia University). For free CFH~7 and its complex with tetrasaccharide these were measured as 4.7 and 8.4 ns, respectively. Analogous data for the 402H isoform yielded τ_c values of 5.0 and 8.5 ns, respectively. These data imply that binding to the heparin tetrasaccharide promotes dimerisation of both CFH~7 variants.

Monitoring of lysine and arginine side-chain resonances during titrations

The lysine N^εH^ε₃⁺ signals are very rarely observed in standard ¹H, ¹⁵N-HSQC spectra. This is because side-chain protons exchange rapidly with water under near physiological conditions, and also N^ε nuclei resonate approximately 90 ppm away from backbone nitrogen resonances and are inverted inefficiently by typical 80 μs ¹⁵N pulses. Similarly, although to a lesser extent, N^εH^ε resonances of arginines are difficult to observe at neutral pH. It was demonstrated recently that refocusing of lysine 2H₃⁺_zN^ε_{x,y} coherences prior to the t₁ period allows monitoring of N^ε_{x,y} coherences in a HISQC experiment⁴¹; in-phase N^ε_{x,y} coherences have longer relaxation times and are not quenched by exchange with water. Nevertheless, the HISQC experiment generally works well only if the exchange of H^ε protons with water during the INEPT steps is slowed down by lowering the pH (2-4) and the temperature (5-15 °C). Under physiological conditions, N^εH^ε₃⁺ resonances were detected by the HISQC experiment only in the presence of stable salt bridges^{53,54} or in protein complexes⁴¹ where lysine side-chains NH atoms are protected from rapid exchange with water. In the case of CFH~7, free or in complex with the tetrasaccharide, no lysine side-chain resonances were observed in the HISQC experiment under physiological conditions.

On the other hand, all five N^εH^ε₃⁺ cross peaks appeared in the HISQC spectrum of free CFH~7 (Fig. 2) when the temperature was lowered to 283 K and the pH was adjusted to 3.0. A ¹H, ¹⁵N-HSQC spectrum collected under these conditions confirmed that the protein was folded (data not shown).

The $N^{\epsilon}H_3^+$ resonances were subsequently assigned through a comparison of the lysine side-chain carbon frequencies in 3D (H)CCENH₃⁴¹ and (H)C(CO)NH-TOCSY⁴³ spectra (Fig. 1S). Despite the fact that these spectra were acquired at different pH-values, the match between individual CH chemical shifts was good, which is consistent with the remarkable stability of CCP modules⁵⁵.

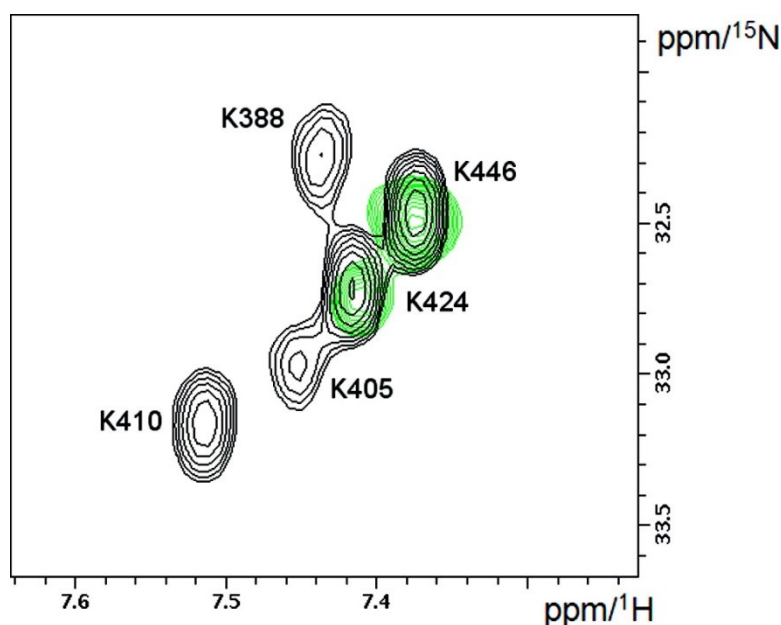


Figure 2. Superimposed 1H , ^{15}N -HISQC spectra of the free (black) and cross-linked protein (green) at pH 3.0, 283 K.

Unfortunately, addition of tetrasaccharide to ^{15}N -labeled CFH~7 at pH 3.0 and 283 K caused it to precipitate. We therefore decided to follow complex formation at pH 7.4 and 298 K via resonances of non-exchangeable lysine H^{ϵ} , C^{ϵ} (or N^{ζ}) side-chain atoms using a ^{15}N , ^{13}C -labelled sample. This was accomplished using the 3D H_2CN experiment⁴⁴ which uses the non-exchangeable H^{ϵ} protons for excitation and detection and indirectly monitors N^{ζ} and C^{ϵ} chemical shifts. Sufficient resolution was achieved by recording the $H^{\epsilon}N^{\zeta}$ or $H^{\epsilon}C^{\epsilon}$ 2D planes, rather than acquiring full 3D spectra. H_2CN spectra of the complex were assigned by recording the $H^{\epsilon}N^{\zeta}$ plane of the H_2CN experiments on a free protein sample and comparing the ^{15}N chemical shifts with those obtained from the HISQC experiments. Both H_2CN planes were acquired during the course of a titration of CFH~7 with tetrasaccharide. The $H^{\epsilon}C^{\epsilon}$ -plane showed a better resolution of lysine resonances than the $H^{\epsilon}N^{\zeta}$ plane. Only two lysine residues (K405 and K388) exhibited significant chemical shift changes after addition of tetrasaccharide (Fig 3a).

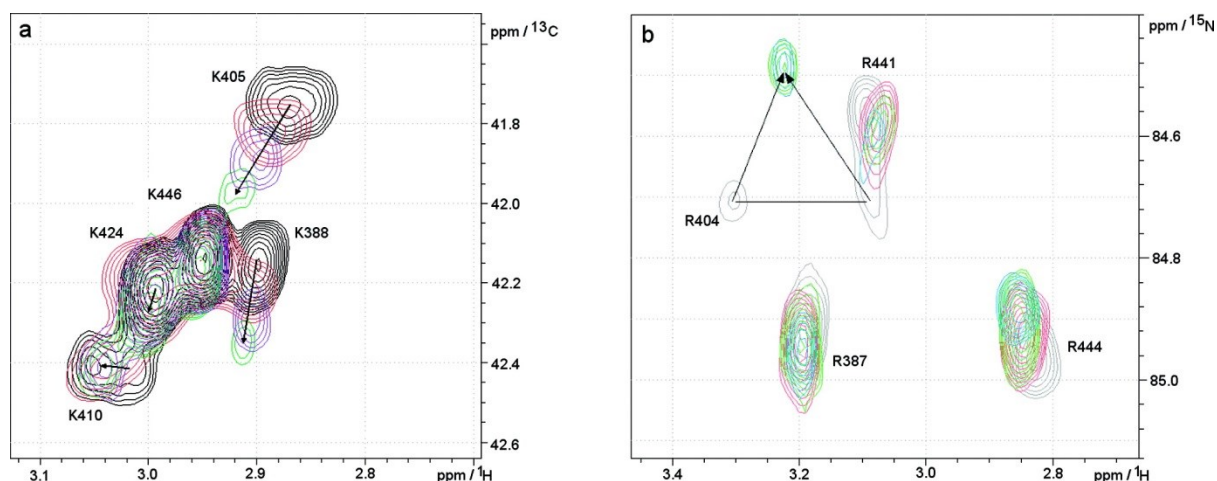


Figure 3. Lysine or arginine side-chain resonances monitored using the H_2CN experiment during the titration of CFH~7 with heparin tetrasaccharide at pH 7.4 and 298 K. (a) $H^{\delta}C^{\epsilon}$ plane showing the lysine signals with protein : ligand ratios of 1:0 (black), 1:0.5 (red), 1:1 (pink), 1:2 (green). (b) $H^{\delta}N^{\epsilon}$ plane showing the arginine signals with protein : ligand ratios of 1:0 (gray), 1:0.5 (red), 1:1 (green), 1:2 (blue).

The same experiment also monitors the movement of arginine H^{δ} , C^{δ} (or N^{ϵ}) side-chain resonances, which appear as folded peaks when a small spectral width centered at 33 ppm is used in the indirectly detected ^{15}N dimension. The chemical shift perturbations of arginine $N^{\epsilon}H^{\epsilon}$ resonances were smaller than those of $H^{\delta}N^{\epsilon}$ of lysines, which can be explained by the fact that it is the guanidino group of arginines that is involved in the electrostatic interaction and not N^{ϵ} ⁵⁶. For arginine residues, the $H^{\delta}N^{\epsilon}$ plane (Fig. 3b) showed better resolution than the $H^{\delta}C^{\delta}$ plane. Of the four arginine residues, only R404 has non-equivalent CH_2 protons. This residue exhibited the largest cross peak movement during the titration. The second largest changes were observed for the $H^{\delta}N^{\epsilon}$ resonances of R444, while the remaining two signals, belonging to R387 and R441, moved only very little.

Zero-length cross-linking of protein-GAG complexes

The heparin tetrasaccharide was cross-linked to CFH~7 as described in the Experimental section. The products were separated by cation-exchange chromatography at pH 6.0 (Fig. 4), and fractions were analyzed by positive mode MALDI-TOF MS. Unlike the free protein that binds and is eluted with 0.3M NaCl (7320.5 Da peak in Fig. 4), the cross-linked CFH~7: heparin tetrasaccharide conjugate, being more anionic, did not bind and was recovered in the flow through. It yielded the strongest peak at 8378.4 Da – a M_r corresponding to CFH~7 cross-linked to a single tetrasaccharide that has lost one sulfate group. A mass difference of 80 Da (equivalent to the mass of SO_3) between additional peaks

indicated further loss of sulfate groups during MS analysis. Minor compounds eluting at salt concentrations < 0.3 M correspond to modifications of the free protein due to the remaining cross-linking reagent after separation of the activated GAG. The peak with a MW > 15 kDa is likely a product of protein-protein cross-linking.

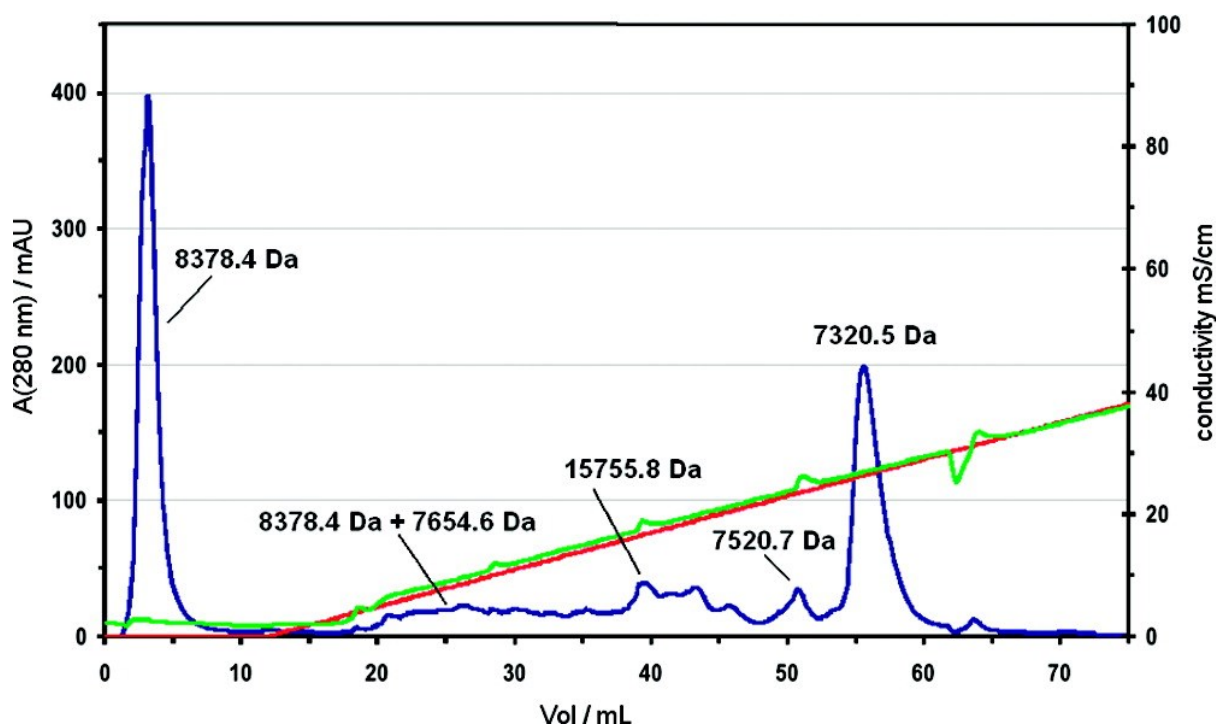


Figure 4. Cation-exchange chromatography at pH 6.0 of the reaction mixture after cross-linking CFH~7 to fully sulphated heparin tetrasaccharide. Molecular masses of selected peaks were determined by MALDI-TOF MS.

Characterization of the cross-linked conjugate by NMR and MS

A ^1H , ^{15}N -HSQC spectrum of the cross-linked CFH~7-tetrasaccharide conjugate, recorded at 298 K and pH 6.0 (Fig. 2S), exhibited almost complete loss of signals from the N-terminal portion, as shown on the protein structure in Fig. 5. Some of the remaining cross peaks had distorted line-shapes, while others were as sharp as those seen in the spectrum of the free protein. None of the three, N-terminal lysine residues showed cross peaks in the HSQC spectrum of the conjugate (Fig. 2), while the K424 and K446 $\text{N}^{\zeta}\text{H}_3^+$ cross peaks were clearly visible and experienced almost no changes in chemical shifts or line widths.

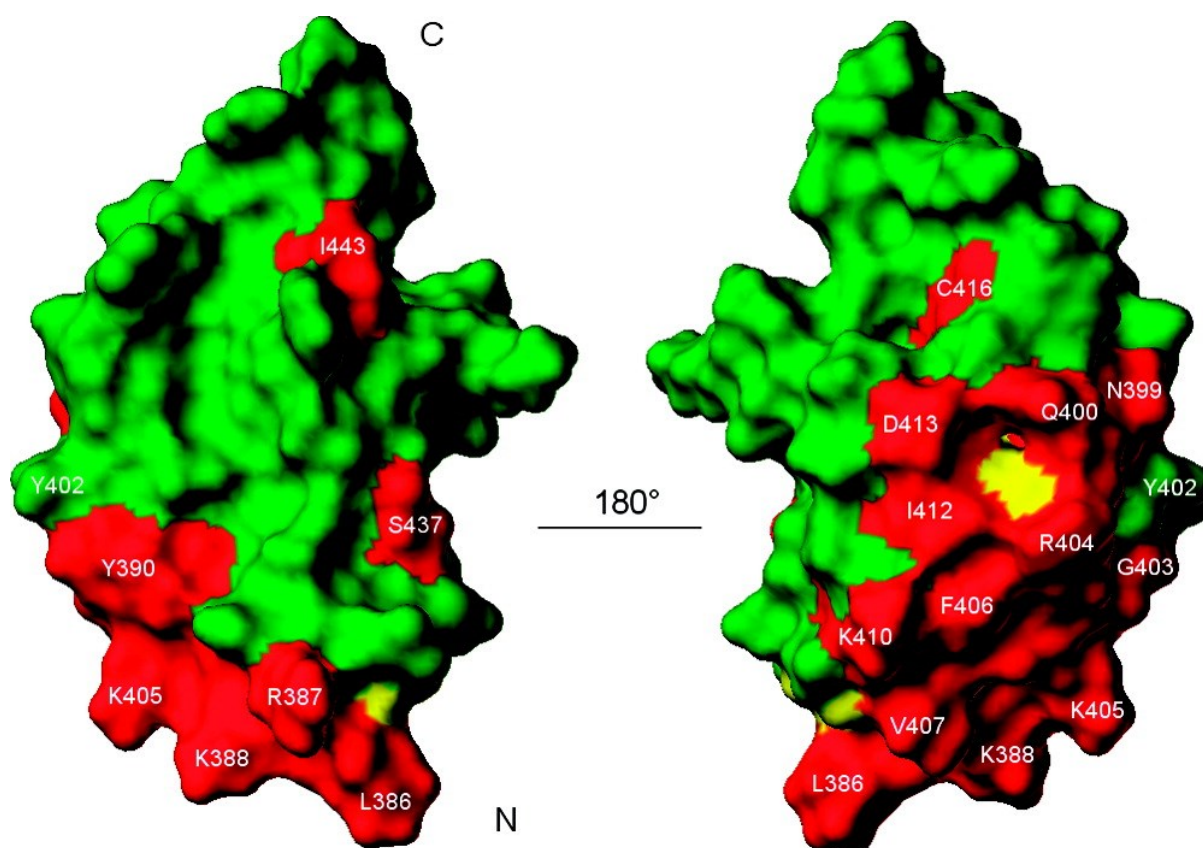


Figure 5. NMR structure of CFH~7 (pdb entry 2JGX) showing residues whose NH backbone (red) or side-chain (yellow) resonances are missing in the ^1H , ^{15}N -HSQC spectrum of the cross-linked sample. The orientation of the molecule on the right is identical to that in Fig. 1b. Figure rendered using Sybyl.

Accurate FT-ICR-MS measurements confirmed that cross-linking produced a covalent 1:1 conjugate of tetrasaccharide and CFH~7 with a M_r of 8460.5 Da. (Fig 6). ECD and in-source fragmentation resulted in progressive sulfate loss but not in significant protein fragmentation, confirming the stability of the cross-linked conjugate and the lability of NS/OS bonds. The high stability of the conjugate in MS-MS experiments is likely caused by the low largest obtainable charge state (+5) and is a result of the presence of seven negative charges on the tetrasaccharide. Peptide analysis after trypsin digestion or chemical cleavage was therefore employed to investigate the site of the cross-linking.

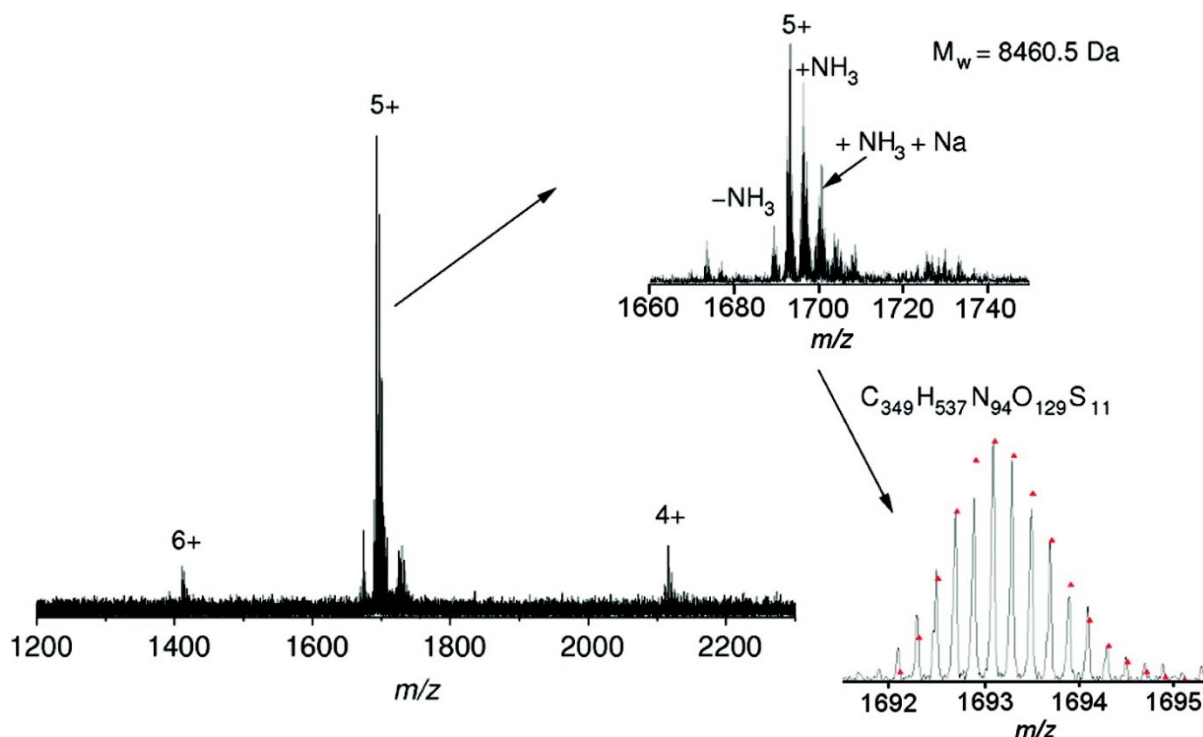


Figure 6. FTICR-MS spectrum of CFH~7 cross-linked to fully sulfated heparin tetrasaccharide. A simulation of the isotope pattern for a charge state of +5 (red triangles) corresponds well to the measured main peak (black).

Trypsin digestion and chemical cleavage of the cross-linked species

As high concentrations (0.1 M) of DTT alone did not reduce the two disulfide bonds within CFH~7, the complex was denatured by combined treatment with 8 M urea and 0.25 M DTT, prior to alkylation with iodoacetamide. Successful reduction and alkylation was confirmed by MALDI-TOF MS. Protein fragments from the subsequent trypsin digest, with MWs of 1470.6 Da, 1879.7 Da and 2129.8 Da (Fig. 3S), were identified as peptides $S_{411}IDVACHPGYALPK_{424}$, $A_{425}QTTVTCTMENGWSPTPR_{441}$ and $K_{388}CYFPYLENGYNQNYGR_{404}$ (theoretical masses of 1470.7 Da, 1879.0 Da and 2129.3 Da, respectively). These fragments included lysine residues K388 and K424, indicating that these had not been modified by cross-linking. Additionally, the generation of the first of these peptides (S_{411} - K_{424}) suggests that K410 is also unmodified, as this residue is still recognized, and cleaved at by trypsin.

Chemical fragmentation using TFA and microwave radiation⁴⁷ undertaken as a complementary approach yielded fragments which differed from those obtained using trypsin. The chemical cleavage effectively ‘sequenced’ the C-terminus of the protein (Fig. 4S), and established that K446 is also unmodified. In summary, the MS techniques directly showed that residues K388, K424 and K446 are not modified by cross-linking, and implied that K410 also remains unmodified. Thus, according to these experiments, K405 is the point of attachment of tetrasaccharide to CFH~7 within the conjugate.

Discussion

Previous studies based on standard ^1H , ^{15}N -HSQC spectra identified two GAG-binding sites in CFH~7 located near the C- and N-termini^{33,34}. These sites may now be analyzed separately in the light of the experimental results presented above. Four basic residues could potentially contribute to the binding at the C-terminus: K424, R441, R444 and K446. Of these only R444 showed a significant movement of side-chain resonances in the titration experiments monitored by H_2CN spectra (Fig 3b). At the same time backbone NH resonances of R444 remained relatively unperturbed. Inverse observations were made for K446, where backbone NH resonances were perturbed significantly upon titration while the side-chain resonances did not move at all (Fig 3a). The HSQC spectrum of the cross linked species showed $\text{N}^{\zeta}\text{H}_3^+$ cross peaks of K424 and K446 that were also unchanged compared to the free protein. These observations were supported by MS analysis of the conjugate that identified peptide fragments containing unmodified lysines at these positions. We therefore infer that the side-chain of R444 is the main contributor to charge-charge interactions at the C-terminal binding site, while the K446 backbone amide forms a hydrogen bond to the tetrasaccharide. Involvement of the R444 side-chain in the binding is in agreement with this side-chain coordinating a SOS molecule in the crystal structure of the CFH~6-8H-SOS complex³⁴. Overall, the C-terminal binding site is weaker than the N-terminal one. This suggestion is supported by the limited movement of backbone and side chain resonances, and also by the lack of cross-linking of tetrasaccharide to this region of the protein.

Amongst the five basic residues of the N-terminal binding site of CFH~7, R387, K388, R404, K405 and K410, the H_2CN experiment identified side-chain resonances of K388, R404 and K405 as experiencing the largest chemical shift changes during titration with tetrasaccharide. Of these, K388 did not show perturbation of the backbone NH cross peaks, while the other two residues did. The ^1H , ^{15}N -HSQC and HSQC spectra of the cross-linked conjugate lacked cross peaks from residues in the N-terminal portion of the protein, which could be explained by an intermediate-timescale conformational exchange induced by the attachment of the tetrasaccharide (Fig. 2, Fig. 2S). MS analysis of the trypsin digest of the conjugate established that K388 and K410 were not modified, leaving only one lysine residue, K405, available for the tetrasaccharide attachment. Combined MS and NMR data therefore allow us to locate the site of tetrasaccharide cross-linking to the side chain of K405.

Overall, we conclude that the side-chains of K405, R404, and K388 provide most of the charge-charge interactions of the N-terminal HS/heparin-binding site of CFH~7. This is in agreement with mutagenesis studies which showed that the mutations K405A and R404A significantly reduced heparin binding to CFH~6-8⁵⁷. The K388A mutation caused a smaller decrease in heparin affinity⁵⁷, but in the context of a R387A/K388A double mutation⁵⁸ the effects were substantial. Comparison of

our solution data with the X-ray structure of the CFH~6-8(H402)-SOS complex³⁴ is not straightforward for several reasons. The two studies use different proteins (triple *vs* single module, and H402 *vs* Y402 variant) and different ligands (SOS *vs* fully sulfated heparin tetrasaccharide). Multiple SOS molecules are seen in the crystal structure of the CFH~6-8 (H402)-SOS complex, where several CFH~6-8 molecules contribute to the binding of each SOS molecule in an overall stoichiometry of 1:1. It seems possible that the observed arrangement in the protein crystal, prepared by co-crystallisation, reflects a tendency of CFH~6-8 to oligomerize in solution in the presence of a highly sulfated GAG mimic. This hypothesis is supported by our ¹⁵N relaxation measurements which found increased self-association of both CFH~7 variants in the presence of heparin tetrasaccharide. The X-ray structure shows hydrogen bonds between the sulfate and backbone NH of F391 in the immediate vicinity of Y402. This is consistent with the movement of NH backbone resonances Y390 and F391 observed in our titrations of CFH~7 with the tetrasaccharide (Fig 1a).

Our data position the tetrasaccharide near the three basic residues K405, R404, and K388, and thus provide strong experimental evidence for its binding in close proximity to Y402. This is in agreement with previous docking studies of a highly sulfated heparin pentasaccharide⁵⁷. It was suggested previously that the mode of binding of SOS in the CFH~6-8 (H402)-SOS complex³⁴ is incompatible with the position of the Y402 side chain found in the solution structure of CFH~7 (Y402)³³. It is therefore likely that different sulfated molecules interact differently with the N-terminal binding site of CFH~7. Differences were also observed in binding to Y402 and H402 of heparin species with various levels and patterns of sulfation⁵⁷. More atomic resolution data will be needed to explain these observations. Given the difficulties in crystallizing factor H modules in the presence of GAGs, NMR will play an important role in these investigations, which will benefit from the methodology outlined in this work.

Summarizing our findings from the methodological point of view, we have shown that the H₂CN experiment³⁴, although requiring a double-labeled sample, is a very useful tool for monitoring lysine and arginine side-chain resonances of protein-GAG complexes under physiological conditions. The usefulness of the HISQC experiment is limited due to the fact that it requires non-physiological conditions. It can, however, provide useful information about covalently-linked, protein-GAG glycoconjugates.

Peptide analysis after trypsin digestion and chemical cleavage was employed to locate the cross-linking site. Four lysine residues out of five were shown, unambiguously, to be unmodified within a conjugate consisting of a tetrasaccharide moiety chemically cross-linked to a lysine side chain. It must, therefore, be the case that K405 is the site at which the tetrasaccharide is attached. No peptide containing the K405 – tetrasaccharide conjugate could be detected by MALDI-TOF, presumably due to the large overall negative charge predicted for such a species. If identification of a GAG-peptide

construct were needed, negative-ion ES-MS spectrometry would be an option²¹. Another potential hurdle to positive identification of the conjugated proteolytic fragment, however, is that covalently attached oligosaccharides might compromise access by trypsin or Lys-C not just to the cleavage site directly following the conjugated lysine residue but also to nearby cleavage sites. This is likely to be a particular problem with GAG-binding proteins since they often contain clusters of lysine and arginine residues.

In a related zero-length cross-linking approach reported previously³⁸ a GAG-binding protein was cross-linked to heparin immobilised on beads. The glycoconjugate was then subjected to proteolytic digestion on the beads, with subsequent identification of the cross-linked peptides by N-terminal sequencing, which gives a “gap” at the position of the cross-linked amino acid residue. This solid phase assay requires immobilised GAGs, and only inhomogeneous heparin preparations are presently commercially available in this form. The authors of this approach also observed some cross-linking to arginines. This was not the case in our study as all arginine residues were recognized by trypsin, and fragments containing unmodified arginines were also present in the chemically-cleaved material. Our approach, being solution-based, can be equally applied to protein cross-linking to any type, size, and specific sequence of GAG oligosaccharides. Furthermore, whereas N-terminal protein sequencing is becoming increasingly less available, cross-linking in solution is more amenable to MS techniques, the application of which is rapidly evolving for GAGs^{59,60,61}.

Conclusions

We have pointed out the shortcomings of the exclusive use of ¹H, ¹⁵N-HSQC spectra for chemical shift mapping of GAG-binding sites on proteins. We found that use of the HSQC experiment for monitoring chemical-shift perturbations of side-chain amine groups is, in the case of a weak complex, limited to low pH and low temperature, although it is potentially useful for the analysis of cross-linked species. We demonstrated that the H₂CN experiment provides a more useful route for characterization of the contributions of individual lysine and arginine side-chains to ligand binding under physiological conditions. Furthermore, we showed that chemical cross-linking, as analyzed by proteolytic or chemical fragmentation and MS, provides a valuable complement to the NMR-based studies. Combining NMR and MS data, we inferred that two GAG-binding sites exist in CFH~7 (Y402) in solution, with the R444 side-chain and the K446 backbone amide being the dominant contributors to charge-charge interactions in the C-terminal binding site, while the side-chains of R404, K405 and K388 are most important for the N-terminal binding site that lies in the immediate vicinity of residue 402, which is implicated in AMD. The methods proposed here, using non-covalent complexes as well as a cross-linked protein-GAG conjugate, have the potential to aid structural investigations in the growing field of protein-GAG interactions.

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